

Conscious uncoupling: Reassessing agency and desire in couple relationships

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The recent separation of celebrity couple Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin after over a decade of marriage, or, as they refer to it, [their 'conscious uncoupling'](#), encourages reflection on the nature of couple relationships in twenty first century Britain. Have we embraced a more fluid and reflective approach to relationships, with diverse relationship forms challenging the status of the heterosexual couple as the normative relationship type? I argue here that couple partnerships have actually retained and strengthened their hold as the centre of our intimate and erotic lives, often to the detriment of our personal development and other relationships.

The reshaping of personal relationships since the 1960s has led to claims that our intimate lives are the premier site of de-traditionalization within late modernity. Yet interview data from my own recently published and ongoing research into the intimate lives of heterosexual men and women has found little to support this thesis. Participants remain heavily invested in being part of a couple even when experiences of their own relationships are less than satisfactory. The accounts given by my participants also suggest that a monogamous pair relationship remains the only publicly acceptable long-term sexual partnership. There is a particular privileging of marriage and long-term partnerships as the ultimate marker of success for women, which is problematic as heterosexual relationships are often overwhelmed by inequalitarian gender relations.

While there is a growing acceptance that childbearing is an individual choice, this doesn't translate in societal attitudes to romantic relationships where it is generally assumed that there is a universal desire to be part of a couple (if not married) and that even the most stubborn single just hasn't met the 'right' person. [Media panics about the 'hook-up' culture](#) supposedly embraced by college students, unable to commit to anything other than a one-night stand, are unsubstantiated. Research into online texts about the rules of heterosexual casual sex (Farvid and Braun, 2013) found that advice was imbued with the message that finding a partner for a long-term relationship should be the ultimate goal for heterosexuals.

Same old story: Domestic labour

One of the most commonly cited examples of inequality within couple relationships is the gendered division of household labour, particularly in the context of increasing female participation in paid work. Studies (see for example Birch, Le and Miller, 2009) exploring the amount of time spent on domestic chores continue to document the unequal division of household labour within heterosexual relationships, with women undertaking around seventy per cent of the work, often on top of full-time paid employment. The couples I interviewed spent their energy justifying the division of household labour rather than challenging it; for

example it was argued that a male partner might work longer hours, or more frequently that women had 'higher standards' or were simply 'better' at cleaning.

That conventional co-resident heterosexual relationships are often marked by traditional gender inequalities is a particular issue with the valorisation of couple relationships. Heterosexuality retains a deep-seated connection with patriarchal relations and continues to be privileged as the norm. And yet we often view our personal lives as intensely private and beyond the realm of the social, meaning that attention is focussed upon individual relationships, rather than the structures which constrain and limit them.

Narratives of Love

Love appears to have moved from an ideal to an expectation for Western couples, and the love that we experience in a couple relationship is regarded as somehow deeper, longer-lasting than in other relationships, apart from perhaps the parent-child bond. The value placed on love may be particularly high within individualised western cultures that have weaker kinship and community ties. However, there has been little research of experiences and meanings of love, possibly because it is largely understood as a pre-social emotion which is too personal to be subjected to sociological analysis.

Although the experience of being in love may feel personal it is always constructed through language, narrative and stories, and is a constant focus of popular culture which provides us with the scripts to construct our own experiences in narrative form. In particular, the idea that we can only love one person works to support the dominant heteronormative framework of monogamous coupledness and diminishes the other connections we experience.

Just the two of us? Monogamy and sexual practice

The ubiquity of sexual images and references within late modern society gives rise to the popular interpretation that western cultures are sexually liberated. Within this context the recent [public](#) and [academic](#) fascination with consensual non-monogamy and polyamorous relationships indicates a challenge to dominant assumptions of the naturalness of monogamy. However the couple relationship is often underpinned by assumptions of lifelong monogamy, with infidelity being the only area of adult sexual conduct that is almost universally condemned according to social and sexual attitude surveys. There is perhaps a gulf between ideology and practice here, with rates of infidelity in marriage in the UK estimated at anything between twenty and sixty per cent.

Findings from my own research indicate that monogamy is regarded as the default position for couple relationships, with little or no room for renegotiation if it is no longer a satisfactory arrangement. The monogamous couple relationship is perceived to be the only legitimate sexual outlet for my respondents, with transgressions regarded as cause to potentially end a relationship. Non-monogamy was generally considered to be a threatening and destabilising option, whether consensual or not. Negotiated consensual non-monogamy was unthinkable to all of my participants for various reasons, including those engaging in affairs, who felt that conducting their extramarital relationships in secret was less of a threat to their marriages than trying to actively negotiate an open relationship with their spouse.

So why the mismatch between values and practice? There is an expectation that the passion that characterises the early stage of a relationship should continue unabated, and in particular

that a robust sex life is indicative of a healthy relationship, contrary to therapeutic evidence (Perel, 2007) suggesting that emotional closeness and familiarity is usually coupled with a loss of sexual desire. Sex has become defined as the central dynamic of couple relationships by theorists, popular culture and individuals alike and non-monogamy may be a response to a decline in sexual frequency or desire within the primary relationship.

From a feminist perspective non-monogamy in heterosexual relationships may be a way for women to exercise their agency and desire in defiance of institutionalised heterosexuality. Traditionally affairs have been regarded as a masculine indulgence, however evidence would suggest that heterosexual women also struggle with sexual fidelity; a third of the members of *AshleyMadison.com*, a dating site designed to facilitate extramarital relationships, are women, with female membership increasing at a faster rate than male. Either way, while the entrenched ideal of monogamy within heterosexual partnerships fails to account for the reality of sexual infidelity it will continue to be a source of relationship conflict and breakdown.

Conclusion

An entrenched belief in the ‘naturalness’ of heterosexual couple partnerships as the ideal mode of human relating persists alongside contemporary ideas about the proliferation of more diverse relationship forms. The couple relationship can be hugely rewarding, yet the very veneration we place on it is also its downfall. It is astonishing that the divorce rate stands at only 42% ([ONS, 2014](#)) when we expect one person to fulfil the roles of best friend, lover, confidante, financial partner, spouse, co-parent, housemate, etc. Couple relationships can be isolating as a concept, making strong and unreasonable demands on those of us in a relationship but also those who are not. A move away from such rigid conceptualisations of relationships would recognise the value that a network of intimates plays in all our lives and therefore alleviate pressure on all sides. As ever, language is a key dimension of this; ‘single’ implies a deficit, ‘in a relationship’ or ‘married’ carries considerable cultural status. Perhaps the default for all of us should be ‘it’s complicated’, particularly when the everyday reality of the couple relationship rarely lives up to its romantic ideal.

References

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